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Vernon Walters: Mr. Background steps forward

WASHINGTON — Shortly after United States Army troops swept ashore in North Africa in 1942, a young American officer met a 13-year-old Moroccan boy, stood him on a tank and gave him a joyride.

And, as the storybooks say, that little boy grew up to be King Hassan II of Morocco. And that young American officer grew up to be Vernon Walters, the leading candidate to be our next ambassador to the United Nations, following the resignation of Jeane Kirkpatrick.

If Walters takes the UN job, it will mark another victory within the Reagan administration for professionalism over ideology. Where Kirkpatrick was outspoken—even demagogic and strident—Walters has made a career of being semi-visible and low-key. He has gone through postwar American history like a 68-year-old, 6-foot-3-inch Zelig, in the Woody Allen movie, popping up in the background of all the grainy old newsreels.

Who was that man at Gen. Mark Clark's side during his triumphal entry into Rome? And who was that fellow with President Truman when he confronted Gen. Douglas MacArthur on Wake Island in 1950?

And there, sitting in the back of the limousine with Vice President Nixon, when a crowd attacked his car in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1958, is that...? And who arranged Henry Kissinger's secret trips to Paris? And who was the first official to drop the hint that President Nixon was deeply involved in the Watergate cover-up? And when the Palestine Liberation Organization asked King Hassan to arrange a secret meeting with the U.S. in 1973, to whom did King Hassan turn?

The answer to all these questions, and lots of others the world hasn't even thought of asking yet, is Vernon Walters. He is the only U.S. representative to have held official

meetings—11 years ago—with the Palestine Liberation Organization. He is the only member of the Reagan administration to have spent four hours in fervent conversation with Fidel Castro—coming away with the impression that Castro wanted to break away from his dependency on the Soviet Union. He is the man who talked Argentina out of turning to Moscow for aid when it was losing the Falklands war.

In short, he is an experienced professional, the exact opposite of the naive and amateurish ideologues whom the first Reagan administration tried to put into key positions. He is best-known for speaking nine languages, and having an uncanny ability to fake four or five others, like Sid Caesar.

Walters' role in exposing Watergate is little-remembered. Six days after the June 16, 1972, burglary, Nixon and his aides figured out that they might stop an FBI investigation into funds that were channeled through Mexico by telling Walters to ask FBI Director Patrick Gray to drop his inquiries.

Defying the White House's instructions, Walters told Gray the FBI operation would not jeopardize CIA activities in Mexico. Nixon then called Gray and asked him if Walters had called. If Nixon knew that Walters was supposed to have called, he must also have known why he called—and the only reason for the call was to organize a coverup.

Whistleblowers don't usually survive in politics, but Walters has. Alexander Haig, who described him as "a man of many languages and matchless contacts," used him as a roving ambassador. Little was said about his activities, but if you plotted Walters' travels by sticking pins into a map, you would conclude that he was trying to surround—and isolate—Castro and Libya's Muammar Khadafy by organizing neighboring countries against them.

HAIG EVEN flirted briefly with the idea of getting Khadafy's neighbors to knock him off—but Walters is a devout Catholic, to whom murder is a mortal sin. He has been accused of being too cozy with Latin American military dictators—many of whom he met as young officers in World War II. And the Argentine generals say he secretly encouraged them to launch their devastating war in the Falklands.

But he understands one basic law of the real world. "Nobody cares about policy," he once said. "Once you leave the United States, its personal relationships that count."



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